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The Magazine of
The National Parks
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The New NPS Director

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An aerial photograph of a rugged, rocky coastline. The land is a mix of light tan and dark grey rocks, with some sparse vegetation. The surrounding water is a deep, dark blue. The title 'GONE ASTRAY' is printed in a large, white, serif font in the upper left quadrant.

GONE ASTRAY

At Channel Islands National Park—one of the most biologically rich lands in the country—the Park Service is under fire for allowing the degradation of resources.

BY GEORGE WUERTHNER

SOMETIMES CALLED America's Galapagos, the Channel Islands may be among the most biologically rich lands on a per acre basis in the country. Located off the coast of California southwest of Santa Barbara, the eight island archipelago is home to more than 800 species of plants and animals.

The islands are a natural laboratory for the study of evolution. Like the Galapagos Islands, isolation from the mainland has led to the evolution of many biologically distinct island plants and animals, with 54 endemic species recorded from the four northern islands alone. Other island inhabitants, such as the small, cat-like foxes that inhabit some of the islands—while not isolated long enough to evolve into separate species—are still genetically distinct from mainland populations.

Channel Island waters are also critically important migration, breeding, and foraging habitat for many sea mammals and birds, including California gray whales, sea lions, elephant seals, and sea otters. The islands support the only breeding colony of northern fur seal south of Alaska, along with the largest known breeding population of Xantus' murrelet, a small black and white sea bird.

The national significance of these island gems was recognized in 1938 when the two smallest islands—Anacapa and Santa Barbara—were protected as a national monument. In the 1960s, momentum grew to designate the entire northern chain of five islands as a national park, and in 1980 Channel Islands National Park was established by Congress. In the same year, the waters for six nautical miles surrounding the islands were declared a National Marine Sanctuary. International recognition of the biological richness of the archipelago led to the park's designation by the United Nations as a Biosphere Reserve in 1976.

Yet, these internationally significant islands are in jeopardy as a result of human-induced changes. Introduced

pigs, goats, cattle, sheep, elk, deer, and other large herbivores are devastating island vegetation, and in some cases destroying archaeological sites that are thousands of years old. Invasion by exotic plants, in many cases abetted by disturbance from the introduced herbivores, threatens many of the islands' native plants.

The decline of native plants is nowhere more evident than on 54,000-acre Santa Rosa Island, the second largest of the northern Channel Islands. A growing dispute over how, and whether, commercial livestock operations should continue on the island, and just what the effect on native plants



Channel Islands, off the coast of California, is made up of an eight-island archipelago. The park is home to a variety of species, including fox.

and animals may be, has pitted environmentalists, including NPCA, against the National Park Service (NPS) and the former owners of Santa Rosa Island, the Vail and Vickers Company. Vail and Vickers, a livestock and land corporation, sold the property to the Park Service in 1986, but continue to run a commercial livestock and trophy hunting business on the island under a Special Use Permit.

In 1996, NPCA filed a 13-count lawsuit contending, among other things, that the Park Service's issuance of the permit to Vail and Vickers violated the Organic, Clean Water, Endangered Species, National Historic Preservation, and Coastal Management acts and the federal agency's own regulations.

Scientists agree that Santa Rosa's native species are in trouble. On July 31 of this year, 13 Channel Island species,

eight of them on Santa Rosa Island, were listed under the Endangered Species Act. Hundreds of others, including 74 on Santa Rosa Island, are listed as species of concern, meaning they are declining in numbers.

Connie Rutherford, a botanist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in Ventura, explains that before the introduction of exotics such as cows and deer, the largest herbivore on Santa Rosa island was a mouse. The absence of grazing animals and distance from the mainland permitted the evolution of plants that lost many defensive mechanisms such as spines, thorns, and noxious chemicals.

Given the evolutionary history of the islands, it is not surprising that USFWS, which, along with the National Marine Fisheries Service, administers the Endangered Species Act, specifically notes that introduced grazing and browsing animals are the primary source of habitat degradation that is driving many Channel Island species toward extinction. Soil loss is the single greatest threat to most species, and the cause of that loss, says USFWS, is "historic grazing." Recent studies on Santa Rosa Island have verified that rates of sedimentation have increased more than six times when compared with pre-livestock conditions.

The agency reports, too, that riparian habitats on Santa Rosa Island are "heavily modified, physically and structurally, and in some areas they have been completely eliminated."

Grazing affects the delicate soil crusts that are crucial soil fertility and erosion prevention. In addition, livestock have trampled nests of the endangered western snowy plover and destroyed archaeological sites.

Despite these documented grazing problems, Vail and Vickers, along with the company's supporters, claim it has been a good steward of the land. Grazing, they point out, has been occurring on the island for 150 years, and native plants still persist.

The fact that some species persist, however, does not mean they are thriving. Dr. Beth Painter, a botanist and

rangeland ecologist from Santa Barbara who has studied the island's flora, says some native plant populations have declined significantly since the last major survey in the 1930s. And, she says, at least a few formerly widespread plant species are now restricted to marginal habitat such as cliff faces and promontories that are inaccessible to livestock. Most of the island, she points out, is populated with exotic species that favor disturbance induced by livestock.

WATER QUALITY is another issue. Howard Kolb, an environmental specialist for the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, says that livestock, along with the roads that serve the ranch and hunting operations, are the source of nonpoint pollution on Santa Rosa Island. Livestock also foul inland streams with manure and urine. On May 17, 1995, his agency issued a Cleanup or Abatement order to NPS as owner of the island and ultimately responsible for management of Vail and Vickers' operations. The agency is awaiting compliance.

The seeds for today's dispute were planted in 1986 when Vail and Vickers sold the island to the Park Service. At

the time of the final sale negotiations, Vail and Vickers was given a choice between selling the island outright for the appraised value of roughly \$29.5 million or retaining a 25-year reservation of use and occupancy with a consequent price reduction of \$3.5 million. Vail and Vickers decided to give up ownership and chose to enter into a business relationship with the Park Service to use the island, says Brian Huse, NPCA's Pacific regional director.

Vail and Vickers retained use and occupancy of an eight-acre home site and continued commercial operations on the island through issuance of a revocable five-year Special Use Permit. Current commercial use includes cattle grazing and guided deer and elk hunts. The Channel Islands National Park Act, however, specifically says that Vail and Vickers' operations could be terminated if the use and occupancy were "incompatible with administration of the park or preservation of [Santa Rosa Island's] resources."

A further source of conflict has centered on public access to the island. Many people feel that the livestock operation interferes with public use of the island. For instance, until recently the public was excluded from much of the island unless visitors had permission from Vail and Vickers.

Finally, questions have been raised about the expenditure of tax dollars for

company operations. The Park Service has built fencing, new livestock loading dock facilities, and paid for other expenses directly related to the ongoing commercial use of the island. In addition, Vail and Vickers pays only a \$1.00 an AUM (Animal Unit Month—a standardized measurement of forage available for livestock consumption per month) for grazing privileges on the island, a rate that is one-fifth to one-tenth the market value of leases on nearby private lands.

Despite these obvious economic costs to the American public, the real concern for most environmentalists centers on the ongoing biological impoverishment of the island. This is made all the more egregious because many suggest the Park Service, which manages the island, has done precious little to halt the ongoing degradation.

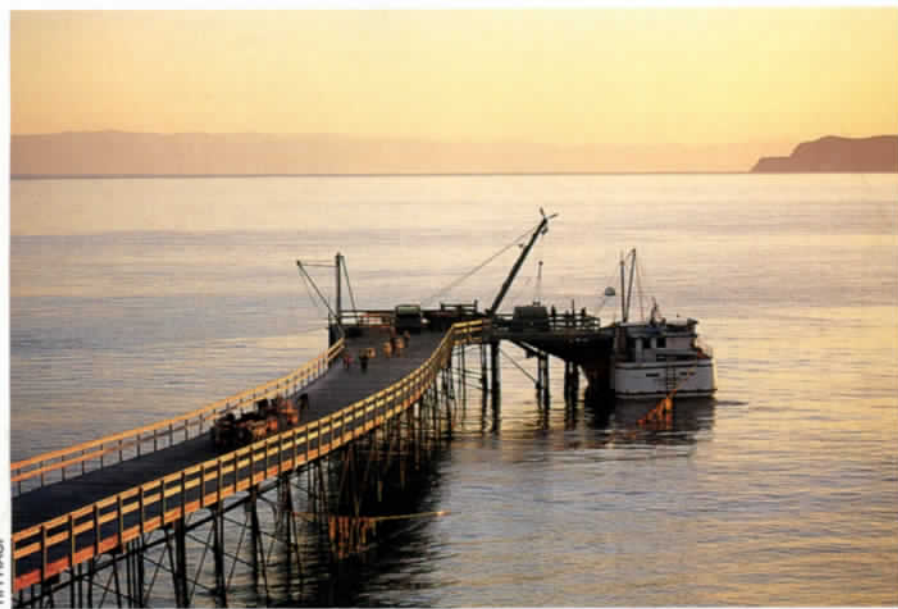
After two years of negotiations concerning problems on Santa Rosa Island, Huse says that NPCA decided to take legal action to force the Park Service to comply with federal laws and to uphold its responsibility to protect park resources.

Legal challenges were filed after NPS put together a draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) and a preferred alternative—released in 1996—which did little to address environmental concerns. The Regional Water Quality Control Board determined that the plan was deficient.

In response to the suit, the Park Service moved forward with a revised management plan. The revised plan proposed closing some parts of the island to grazing and phasing out deer and elk hunting. Huse acknowledges the new plan is an improvement over the previous alternative but still allows too much resource damage.

Vail and Vickers claimed the revised plan would put the commercial operation out of business, and the company filed a countersuit to halt implementation. According to the company's attorney, Bill Thomas, Vail and Vickers alleges a breach of contract, asserting that the Park Service is not honoring the original deal worked out by Congress when the island was sold in 1986.

Vail and Vickers insists it had a "verbal" contract with park officials and



A commercial livestock operation retains use of an eight-acre site on Santa Rosa and continues operating its business through a special use permit.



Erosion is a serious problem on the islands, where the largest plant-eater before the arrival of livestock was a mouse.

others involved in the park establishment, guaranteeing no disruptions in historic use until 2011. Without such assurances, the company says it would not have agreed to sell the island. Thomas says his client has signed affidavits from several park officials involved in the negotiations, as well as the congressional representative from the area at the time, that support Vail and Vickers' contention.

Vail and Vickers garnered support in Congress from Rep. George Radanovich (R), whose district lies 200 miles from the area. Radanovich has introduced legislation to exempt Vail and Vickers' operations from all environmental laws and to guarantee commercial privileges until 2011. Tom Pile, an aide to Radanovich, says the representative introduced the legislation because he feels the Park Service is not living up to its original agreement. He believes that Vail and Vickers should be allowed to continue the commercial operation without undue restrictions until the end of the 25-year agreement.

Rep. Walter Capps (D), whose district encompasses Channel Islands National Park, opposes Radanovich's legislation. Blake Selzer, an aide to Capps, says that

any agreement, verbal or otherwise, would not exempt Vail and Vickers' operation from environmental laws. When it comes to protection of public resources, Selzer says, "the public interest must always prevail over commercial interests."

Bill Thomas maintains that Vail and Vickers is willing to modify its operations to correct many of the environmental problems, and he asserts that his clients have worked diligently with USFWS, NPS, and the water board to draft proposals that respond "fully" to water quality and plant protection issues. The company also offered to reduce deer and elk populations. The dispute, according to Thomas, "is over how much and how quickly changes should occur."

Brian Huse says NPCA's goal is "to improve management to prevent further resource degradation." NPCA wants protection for all rare, threatened, and endangered plants and animals, improvement in water quality, adequate visitor access, and the preservation of archaeological resources. For this to occur, Huse says, "NPS needs to implement management actions that acknowledge, and are responsive to im-

pacts caused by these nonnative herbivores. Certainly, the number of animals will need to be reduced to a level that will stop the degradation, as required by the Endangered Species and Clean Water acts."

In addition, Huse says, "the Park Service must establish adequate standards and guidelines which, with proper monitoring, will indicate whether the new management is succeeding in protecting resources. Should the level of impact exceed the standards, further actions will need to be taken to safeguard public resources," says Huse.

The rare and distinctive flora and fauna of Santa Rosa Island has persisted and survived thousands of years of storms, drought, fire, and changing climate. As caretakers of an International Biosphere Reserve, the United States has a global responsibility to protect the island's unusual species and landscapes. NPCA's goal is to ensure that the Park Service lives up to this expectation.

GEORGE WUERTHNER is a wildlife biologist, freelance writer, and photographer based in Montana. He last wrote for National Parks about invasion of alien species.